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REFORMER START-UP STRATEGY FOR USE IN A SOLID OXIDE FUEL CELL CONTROL SYSTEM

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TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates to methods for operating hydrocarbon catalytic reformers; more particularly, to reformer start-up control conditions; and most particularly, to a strategy and algorithm for calculating a reformer combustor burn time for heating the reformer catalyst to a minimum reforming temperature.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Reformers for catalytically oxidizing hydrocarbons to produce hydrogen and carbon monoxide fuels are well known. Such reformers are used as fuel generators for downstream fuel cell systems in known fashion. Catalytic reforming requires an elevated catalyst temperature that at steady-state is typically between about 650°C and 800°C. The reforming temperature then is maintained either by exothermic reforming or by endothermic reforming in the presence of hot exhaust recycled from the fuel cell system.

At start-up from an ambient temperature, the catalyst must be heated to a minimum temperature of about 500°C before reforming can begin. One method for rapidly heating the catalyst is to combust oxygen and hydrocarbon fuel in an inline combustor ahead of the reformer and to pass the combustor exhaust through the reformer and then past the fuel cell anodes. In this practice, the combustor is operated optimally at a fuel-lean fuel:air ratio, whereas reforming is operated optimally at a very fuel-rich condition. Thus, it becomes of great importance to know when the catalyst surface reaches a temperature sufficient to support catalysis, in order to change over

the mixture from combustion to reforming. If the changeover is too early, the catalyst temperature will be too low, and non-reformed hydrocarbons will be passed to the anodes, causing coking of the anodes and efficiency loss of the fuel cell system. If the changeover is too late, the reformer catalyst durability will be negatively impacted and the potential for pre-ignition in the reformer will be increased.

Obviously, a temperature probe at the catalyst surface could indicate when a suitable surface temperature has been reached. However, in practice such a location is not especially robust or practical and can also interfere with proper flow of gases through the reformer. Instead, a temperature probe typically is disposed within the ceramic elements of the reformer, which serves to protect the probe but also insulates it significantly, creating serious hysteresis between actual surface temperatures and measured temperatures during periods of rapid temperature change in the reformer.

One approach to dealing with this problem is to simply determine empirically how long it takes for the surface to reach the required minimum reforming temperature, and then program the system controller to change the mixture after that time period. However, the length of time will depend upon the thermal state of the catalyst at start-up; the system may have been shut down only recently, in which case the reformer may still be quite warm, thus shortening the required combustion time. Indeed, if the reformer temperature is still sufficiently high to permit reforming, no combustion at all may be needed or desired. Also, the rate of heating will depend upon the latent combustive heat value of the fuel source being used, as well as the heat capacity and mass of the catalyst. Thus, neither a simple time instruction nor catalyst internal temperature measurement is adequate to determine when to change the entering mixture from combustion to reforming.

What is needed in the art is an improved means of estimating when to terminate combustion and change over to reforming.

It is a principal object of the present invention to change over a hydrocarbon reformer from combustion to reforming when the surface temperature of the catalyst exceeds a predetermined value.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Briefly described, a method in accordance with the invention is useful in
5 determining an optimal combustion interval during start-up of a hydrocarbon catalytic
reformer under various temperature conditions. An initial catalyst temperature is
measured and an algorithm is used to calculate a temperature rise in the catalyst mass.
From the initial temperature and the heating gradient, a combustion interval is
calculated and used to terminate combustion, to initiate a combustion quench interval,
10 and to change over the fuel flow rate from combustion to reforming.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention will now be described, by way of example, with reference
15 to the accompanying drawings, in which:

FIG. 1 is a simplified fuel cell system including a hydrocarbon reformer controlled
in accordance with the invention; and

FIG. 2 is an idealized graph showing a typical heating curve in accordance with
the invention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Referring to FIG. 1, a simplified fuel cell apparatus 10 for generating electrical
energy from catalytic combustion of hydrogen includes a fuel cell assembly 12, a
25 catalytic hydrocarbon reformer 14, and an electronic control module 16 (ECM) for
controlling the flow of hydrocarbon fuel 18 and air 20 into reformer 14 via respective
control valves 22,24. Reformer 14 includes a combustion chamber 26, a reforming
section 28 containing catalytic elements 29, and a temperature probe 30 that sends

temperature signals to ECM 16. Combustion chamber 26 includes an igniter 32 controlled by ECM 16.

ECM 16 may include a computing environment operable to perform tasks or instructions in accordance with pre-programmed software constructs including

5 algorithms, execution instructions or sequences, computations, software code modules, interface specifications or the like. It will be understood and appreciated that the functions performed by ECM 16 could be implemented in a computing environment such as a personal computer (PC) or other computing device. Such a computer may also include volatile and nonvolatile, removable and non-removable media implemented

10 in any method or technology for storage of information such as program modules, data structures, computer readable instructions, or other data. Computer storage media may include, but is not limited to, Read Only Memory (ROM), Random Access Memory (RAM), flash memory, Electrically Erasable Programmable Read-Only Memory (EEPROM), or other types of memory, magnetic cassettes, magnetic tape, magnetic

15 disk storage or other magnetic storage devices, CD-ROM, digital versatile disks (DVD) or other optical disk storage, or any other medium which can be used to store the desired information and which can be accessed by computer. Communication media typically embodies computer readable instructions, data structures, program modules or other data in a modulated data signal such as a carrier wave or other transport

20 mechanism and includes any information delivery media. The term "modulated data signal" means a signal that has one or more of its characteristics set or changed in such a manner as to encode information in the signal. By way of example, and not limitation, communication media includes wired media such as a wired network or direct wired connection, and wireless media such as acoustic, RF, infrared and other wireless

25 media. It will be understood that combinations of any of the above should also be included within the scope of computer readable media.

In operation, ECM 16 receives a temperature signal from temperature probe 30 with respect to a general temperature condition with the catalyst in reforming section 28. As noted above, during intervals of changing temperatures within reformer 14, values

from probe 30 lag instantaneous and actual temperature of the functional surfaces of catalytic elements 29. ECM 16 interrogates probe 30, and if the indicated temperature is below a predetermined value, for example, 500°C, at which reforming can take place in elements 29, ECM trims valves 22 and 24 to admit a predetermined flow of fuel 18 and air 20, at a predetermined ratio, into combustor 26. Admitted fuel and air are mixed in combustor 26 and are ignited by igniter 32, creating a hot exhaust that passes 34 into reforming section 28 where it heats elements 29. The spent exhaust passes further 36 into fuel cell assembly 12 and thence is discarded 38. In the prior art, when probe 30 indicates a predetermined temperature value, ECM 16 shuts off fuel flow through valve 22 and initiates a short quench interval to extinguish combustion in combustor 26, then adjusts valves 22 and 24 to provide a predetermined mixture ratio and flow rate suitable for reforming by catalytic elements 29.

Referring to FIG. 2, first and second heating curves 40,42 are shown for system 10 shown in FIG. 1, representing the time during which combustor 26 is in operation to heat elements 29 to a threshold temperature for reforming to commence. Curves 40,42 both begin at an actual ambient temperature of 25°C on the surface of catalytic elements 29, and reach 500°C at elapsed times t_1 and t_2 , respectively. Although curves 40,42 may represent actual conditions on the same system 10, having identical catalyst heat capacities and thermal mass, heating is slower under curve 42 either because the combustion fuel flow is lower, or because the fuel is different and has a lower latent heat value, or both. Further, for curve 40, the elapsed time from t_0 to t_1 is a function of starting at 25°C. However, if the reformer is still warm from a previous use, for example, still at 200°C, the elapsed time for combustion is only t_1-t_3 . Thus, in any start-up of system 10, it is imperative to know the thermal status of the reformer.

Referring still to FIG. 2, as noted above, because of the location of probe 30, a time lag exists between the actual temperature of elements 29 (curve 40) and the temperature response of probe 30 (curve 40'), corresponding to $t_0'-t_0$. Assuming that after this lag the response curve parallels the actual heating curve at any given moment,

it is seen that the actual temperature is about 550°C by the time that probe 30 reports 500°C, that is 50°C higher and $t_1' - t_1$ later than necessary to begin reforming.

In accordance with the present invention, a linear algorithm of the form $y = mx + b$ is provided for ECM 16 to estimate the slope of curve 40 at any given moment and thereby calculate when t_1 will occur:

$$T_P = T_i + \int [FLHV \times FF / (kC_{CAT} \times k_{MASS})] dt \quad (\text{Eq. 1})$$

where T_P equals the predicted temperature (y) at any time after t_0 equals the initial temperature T_i (the intercept b) plus the integral of the fuel latent heat value FLHV times the fuel flow rate FF divided by the constant heat capacity of the catalyst kC_{CAT} times the constant "important" mass k_{MASS} of the catalyst and surroundings (the slope m), all times the change in time dt (x) from t_0 . Note that, in operation, fuel flow rate FF is varied by control valve 22 as conditions require, as described above. Therefore, the calculated slope m $((FLHV \times FF) / (kC_{CAT} \times k_{MASS}))$ will not be constant but instead will vary in relation to the varied flow rate FF. Note also that values for FLHV, kC_{CAT} , and k_{MASS} can be readily established in a laboratory by one of ordinary skill in the art without undue experimentation, as can be the fuel flow FF delivery curve of valve 22.

The value of probe 30 in this invention is to establish T_i , assuming that when the system is started up at any given temperature the reformer is at thermal equilibrium and T_i is in fact a close measure of the actual surface temperature of catalyst 29. Beyond that time, the algorithm substantially follows curve 40 rather than curve 40' to arrive at the desired reforming initiation temperature of 500°C at time t_1 .

While the invention has been described by reference to various specific embodiments, it should be understood that numerous changes may be made within the spirit and scope of the inventive concepts described. Accordingly, it is intended that the invention not be limited to the described embodiments, but will have full scope defined by the language of the following claims.